

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jed Perl, "Matthew Barney's New Epic Is a Mythomaniacal Mailer-Hemingway Mash-Up And he's more scatological than ever," *The New Republic*, February 11, 2014.



Movie-making has always attracted over-the-top personalities. But nobody among the current elite crew of megalomaniacal mixed-media artists has gone farther than Matthew Barney when it comes to rejecting the old-fashioned constraints of the art gallery in favor of the dramatic possibilities of film. Compared with the pharaonic immodesty of *River of Fundament*, Barney's five-and-a-half-hour epic that premieres this week at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#), the efforts of Douglas Gordon, Ragnar Kjartansson, Christian Marclay, Shirin Neshat, and Bill Viola look like discretion itself. Barney piles on the jumbo-sized themes in *River of Fundament*; like some shopper in a Wagnerian Costco, he won't be satisfied with one or two symbols when he can have the twelve-pack or the twenty-four pack.



Ivano Grasso, courtesy of BAM

Matt Barney's River of Fundament

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Before anything else, the movie is a meditation on Norman Mailer and his novel *Ancient Evenings*. That pathologically self-indulgent exercise in historical fiction, almost universally reviled when first published in 1983, was Mailer in the throes of an Ancient Egyptian fever dream, with gods and mortals enacting the tough-guy author's obsessions with birth, death, rebirth, sex, and all things anal. Barney is besotted with Mailer and his legend—and with the scatological excess that gave *Ancient Evenings* its cringe-inducing weirdness and will leave moviegoers covering their eyes during certain scenes in *River of Fundament*. You might imagine that a mythopoetic reimagining of Mailer's life was enough for one movie, but Barney, whose ego may be even bigger than Mailer's, has thickened the stew that is *River of Fundament* with a dirge for American car culture, an anthology of world music, a study of New York literary life, an exploration of America's withering industrial landscape, a salute to Ernest Hemingway, an opera, a one-woman show by Broadway actress Elaine Stritch, and a documentary about the creation of several of Barney's art works. *Ancient Evenings* was the story of an Egyptian nobleman by the name of Menenhatet I who was reincarnated three times, with each reincarnation involving crossing the river of feces (yes, you heard right). And in *River of Fundament* it is Mailer who is reincarnated. And, yes, there is a river of feces, which flows beneath Mailer's Brooklyn Heights apartment. That's one of the rivers in *River of Fundament*; there's also the river that runs around Manhattan; and the river where the salmon spawn and die in Idaho, a part of the country that holds a special interest for Barney because it's where another of his hyper-masculine literary heroes, Ernest Hemingway, had a home and committed suicide. Are you still with me? If you are, you haven't yet really fallen under the spell of *River of Fundament*, which is engineered for bewilderment.

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An American-made car motif is featured prominently in River of Fundament

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The big news—the amazement—is that Barney holds all this together for as long as he does. The first three or four hours of *River of Fundament* are confidently, elegantly paced. Barney has grown beyond the self-consciously static visual style of the *Cremaster* cycle, the set of five films (1994-2002) which have something to do with the reproductive cycle and somehow involve the murderer Gary Gilmore, the magician Harry Houdini, the actress Ursula Andress, and a red-and-gold baroque theater. In *River of Fundament*, his abiding obsessions with ritual, fetish, and movie-star charisma are presented with considerably more fluidity—with a roving camera eye that suggests playfulness, even wit. When Barney organizes one of his lunatic parades in Los Angeles for River of Fundament, with workingmen and musicians in fancy costumes accompanying an American-made car to its death (or is it reincarnation?), he keeps the camera in motion, so the delirious combination of Egyptomania and Chrysler-mania feels light, almost fairytale-ish. And in the first couple of hours of *River of Fundament*, dominated by a fictionalized wake held for Mailer in his Brooklyn Heights apartment, the chiaroscuro lighting and quickening pace make it easy to enjoy watching the talented performers, professional and amateur alike, drift through a high-flying literary-artistic celebrity mash-up. Stritch is great to watch in her owlish glasses, even if she's reading some of Mailer's most bombastic prose. And the artist Lawrence Weiner and the columnist Liz Smith are diverting screen presences, at ease before the camera. Paul Giamatti, playing Pharaoh Ptah-Nem-Hotep but in modern dress, has the professional's way of bringing some dramatic sense to impossible mystico-Dadaist situations. And deeper into the movie, when Barney presents an immense iron pour staged in a nighttime Detroit, there is authentic moviemaking magic in the funky sumptuousness of the antiquated industrial architecture, the fleet of workmen like Constructivist robots in their boxy fireproof clothing, and the glittering rivulets and pools of molten metal.

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Hugo Glendinning, courtesy of BAM

Workmen and pools of molten metal

Barney is by no means the only artist who started out in the galleries and pretty soon discovered that his appetite for spectacle was better served by the communal rites of the movies. Doesn't everybody now agree that Julian Schnabel is an infinitely more interesting [moviemaker](#) than he is a painter? And who wouldn't rather watch Christian Marclay's *The Clock* than look at the [paintings](#) he recently exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery? The challenge for Barney is that as a filmmaker he's raised the stakes even higher than Schnabel or Marclay. Schnabel has pretty much embraced the conventions of Hollywood storytelling. With *The Clock*, Marclay is using a Conceptualist structure, each minute in the movie matching a minute in the day. Barney is reaching for something far more difficult to achieve—a slow-building, gradually climaxing operatic structure, with more than a dozen themes set in motion and ultimately woven together. The trouble with *River of Fundament* is that what Barney wants to weld into an epic keeps collapsing into the constituent parts of an oversized collage. The mythomaniacal scheme becomes a Ponzi scheme, with new effects piled on top of crumbling older effects.

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By the last third of *River of Fundament*, more has been thrown at the audience than it can reasonably manage to absorb. Even a striking conceit—Mailer's Brooklyn Heights apartment, now transformed into a houseboat making its way along the darkening waters around Manhattan—feels like one conceit too many. A battle between the Egyptian gods Horus and Set, staged in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, is certainly one ritual too many. And when the ancient deities break into modernist operatic song (by [Jonathan Bepler](#)) it's hard not to feel that Barney is just thrashing around, trying to figure out how to keep his themes afloat. In the earlier, more solidly grounded parts of the movie, Mailer's youngest son, John Buffalo Mailer, holds his own playing his father; his looks and demeanor suggest a reincarnated Heath Ledger. But by the end of the film, even Ellen Burstyn and Maggie Gyllenhaal (who play Hathferti at different points in her life) are unable to lend some gravitas to the increasingly absurd goings-on. Barney cannot sustain the leisurely yet confident pacing with which he originally set his epic in motion. The movie begins with the camera exploring the interior and surroundings of Hemingway's home in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountain Range, and Barney returns there at the end, as if to finally enfold his fascination with the Mailer myth within the Hemingway myth. The symmetry, however, is terribly forced, and Barney includes so many shots of idyllic mountains and salmon spawning that it begins to seem as if he's tacked on an entire National Geographic documentary.

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Movie still courtesy of BAM

A battle in the Brooklyn Navy Yard

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Barney makes a brilliant theatrical entrance near the beginning of *River of Fundament*, rising out of the muddy mythic waters that churn below Mailer's apartment. With his aquiline features, wide-brimmed hat, and neo-Victorian beard, he is a striking presence, reminiscent of [the bearded Christian Bale accepting an Oscar for *The Fighter*](#). Barney pretty much vanishes for the middle few hours of the movie, and he is much missed, because his stoical stare has just the undercurrent of Beckett-like skepticism to keep the hooey of *River of Fundament* under control. Now deep into his forties, Barney is no longer the swaggering artist-hunk of his earlier star turns in galleries and museums. For his first show at the [Barbara Gladstone Gallery](#) in SoHo in 1991, Barney presented a video of himself, naked aside from a mountain climbing harness, screwing ice hooks into the walls of the gallery as he climbed along the ceiling, down a wall and then down a stairwell. His good looks were part of the act; he had [modeled for J. Crew](#) and earned points with gallery-goers by giving his preppy glamour a Duchampian spin. For a retrospective at the Guggenheim in 2003, Barney scaled the rotunda wearing a pink kilt. And his appearances in video and film are invariably accompanied by piles of objects d'art that suggest demented, vehemently anti-utilitarian variations on the kind of equipment you'd expect to find in an athletic club or a gynecologist's office.

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In *River of Fundament*, Barney moves beyond the stud-prince posturing of his earlier work. Now his enigmatic gaze suggests an emotional depth. And there's certainly depth to some passages in *River of Fundament*, which marks an enormous advance beyond the grossly overinflated red velvet wedding cake that was the *Cremaster* cycle. Mailer's wake recalls the gossipy pleasures of *My Dinner with Andre*, with Lawrence Weiner, Liz Smith, Salman Rushdie, Elaine Stritch, and the rest of the Manhattan sophisticates locked in a game of self-congratulation



Courtesy of Cremaster Fanatic

Matthew Barney as a J. Crew model

and self-parody that echoes the endless, Alice-in-Wonderland conversation between Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory. And the rituals Barney concocts with his Chrysler cars have some of the wacko rococo grandeur of scenes from Cocteau and Fellini. Barney might actually have the makings of an American Cocteau. His hero worship—his veneration for Hemingway and Mailer and Ancient Egypt—suggests Cocteau's veneration for Picasso and Ancient Greece. And Barney, like Cocteau before him, understands that an element of camp or porn can be just the thing to recharge the old myths. It's difficult to make up one's mind about a lot of Cocteau's work. And it's not easy to make up one's mind about Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*. The hooey and the high points are hopeless intertwined. One thing is sure. The deeper Barney moves into the black magic of movie-making, the brighter his perfervid imaginings become.